

Semiotic Interludes II at Duke University

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The third symposium of semiotics, organized by Edna Andrews, professor of linguistics and cultural anthropology at Duke University on 20–22 February 2026,³ brought together semioticians and Slavists interested in semiotics from the US, Canada, Czechia, Denmark and Estonia. The topics of the series stem from the wide spectrum of Andrews' academic interests and the events are special for their unusually intimate and engaging atmosphere of scholarly dialogue.

What lied in the centre of discussions in 2026 was the use of AI – a topic that daily poses new challenges in education, society, and culture. Frederik Stjernfelt from Aalborg University looked into Peirce's early works on machine learning and their relevance for thinking about AI today. Stéphanie Walsh Matthews, one of the editors-in-chief of *Semiotica*, focused on risks posed by the use of the metaphor 'artificial intelligence' itself as well as risks of changes in humans' cognitive abilities due to the time and attention devoted to AI-generated content. The director of Duke University's Office of Assessments Jennifer Hill brought to the discussion experiences from a university-level perspective – AI-related issues in assessment and uses of AI in research and university governance, particularly in the accreditation process. Part of semiotic questions surrounding AI or, to use the suggested term, IPS (*Information Processing Tools*) deal with technical issues of meaning-making and its simulation, the rest have to do with human cognitive and social abilities and IPS' impact on culture. What parts of living do people neglect when they dedicate themselves to AI and AI-created content?

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³ The symposium "Semiotic Interludes II: The Interactions of Multilingualism, Cognition, Memory and Text across Cultures and Disciplinary Approaches" (20–22 February 2026) was hosted and funded by Slavic and Eurasian Language Resource Center (SEELRC), Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies (CSEES), and Duke University.

Mary Osborne, who is both senior product manager for natural language processing and generative AI at the analytics platform company SAS and lecturing fellow in computational linguistics at Duke University, demonstrated the distinction between two types of multilingualism – embodied lived multilingualism of a human person and the multiplicity of language-like unit-based codes in machines that can seem multilingual in their output and thus lead to mistaking fluency for accuracy. In a similar vein, Edna Andrews and Duke University programme director Yana Lowry discussed emergent meaning in music. They highlighted that meaning-making in music requires both syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions, unlike systems such as AI which rely strictly on syntagmatic information processing.

Within the linguistics thread of the event, Ron Feldstein, slavist and professor emeritus at Indiana University Bloomington, introduced a novel morphological model of stress patterns in Russian. This was followed by two accounts of sociolinguistic struggles. One of these was the paper by Grace Fielder, professor emerita in the Department of Russian and Slavic Studies at the University of Arizona, who argued that the long and fierce debates on the long and short definite articles in Bulgarian standard language are actually a fight over colonial gender markers. Another contested journey, introduced by sociolinguist Walt Wolfram from North Carolina State University, concerned the variety of English used by the Native American Lumbee Tribe, demonstrating how a unique dialect serves as a marker of ethnic identity when an ancestral language has been lost. The Lumbees' linguistic resilience is deeply intertwined with the tribe's century-long struggle for full federal recognition, which is a sovereign legal status they finally secured in late 2025. Educational psychologist David Malone explained how introducing multilingualism and linguistic varieties into the classroom emerges as yet another delicate situation.

A panel on multimedia in languages and cultures brought together American experiences of teaching Russian and Slavic languages in universities (slavist Troy Williams), to government officials (Susan Sagatov, who served as language analyst and is also the inventor of the instructional tool ScribeZone, and Bogdan Sagatov, who developed specialized language training curriculums) and to astronauts (Anthony Vanchu, specialized language instructor and former professor of Slavic languages at the University of Texas). In both university and professional contexts, successful language acquisition depends heavily on the learner's motivation and active participation. Instructors increasingly support such learning process by using multimedia materials to teach language through culture and culture through language. Highlighting innovative approaches, yet another presentation demonstrated how seemingly unrelated fields – ethnomusicology and teaching

public speaking – can intersect when musical experiences are introduced into the classroom. As Ingrid Byerly, an interdisciplinary scholar in the arts, humanities and social sciences from Duke University, explained, public speaking can be made easy and meaningful for the student through acknowledging the student's personal experience. Seen from an ethnomusicological perspective, the speaker's voice is an instrument and the delivery acts as musical notation that creates their unique style. Another unexpected connection was created by Luke Tilbury, US government representative who addressed the challenge of 'language readiness', or the need for professionals to maintain their advanced foreign language skills over a long term, even when not actively using them. He proposed that discussing meta-ethics as the complex philosophical study of the nature of moral values provides a deeply engaging intellectual "hook" to maintain learning motivation. Personal and everyday experiences were also discussed by Maria Curtis, professor of anthropology and cross-cultural and global studies from the University of Houston-Clear Lake, and Peter Casarella, professor of theology from Duke Divinity School. They both explored how individual moments shape larger cultural narratives. Casarella viewed this through the Latinx theology of Alejandro García-Rivera, combining Latin-American culture, Peircean philosophy, and Mukařovský's semiotic aesthetics, thus demonstrating that a theology of beauty that ignores the marginalized is fundamentally incomplete. Shifting to a different cultural context, Curtis explained the process of organizing a personal archive, showing how the broader history of Arab-American culture can be reconstructed through a family's preserved everyday materials.

Cultural texts were conceptualized via the list as a meaning-making device, using the example of an alternative American anthem (slavist Stanislav Shvabrin from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and musical interpretations of joy (composer, keyboardist and music educator Huijuan Susie Ling). University of Tartu semioticians Maarja Ojamaa and Tiit Remm viewed the development of the notion of 'text', observing how it has been used in *Sign Systems Studies* across the journal's history and tracing its trajectory from a concept of literary semiotics through wide metaphorical application in different subfields to a potential general semiotic term.

In addition, Jamin Pelkey from Toronto Metropolitan University and L'udmila Lackova Bennett from Charles University in Prague introduced a new research project concerned with neurosemiotic perspectives on research into and treatment of Parkinson's disease.

Symposia and summer schools at Duke and in Kääriku and Tartu

The Duke semiotics symposium convened for the third time.⁴ However, the series grew out of a two-decade-long tradition of symposia and summer schools focused on Slavic studies in the US. There appears to be a remarkable kinship between the symposia organized by Edna Andrews at Duke and the summer schools initiated by Juri Lotman in Kääriku and Tartu. Both series of events have been rather informal gatherings dedicated to open exchange of ideas concerned with topics of Russian language and culture as well as semiotics. Indeed, Lotman and his summer schools have actually served as an inspiration for Edna Andrews – a connection dating back to her pioneering work in systematically mediating Lotman's thought to the English-speaking world (Andrews 2003). While her own research has evolved from Slavic studies to neurosemiotics and Peircean semiotics, questions of language acquisition, cultural learning, and especially multilingualism remain a unifying theme across all the discussions. The Duke meetings, Kääriku/Tartu summer schools, and similar gatherings have always revolved around shared scholarly concerns, while acting as vital incubators of semiotic thought. Leaving aside bureaucratic and project-driven tasks, their format of face-to-face meetings has offered unmediated space and time for lively interaction as well as rigorous discussion of both fundamental and up-to-date issues in semiotics.

Unrushed time for listening and conversing and just spending time in the company of other scholars beyond the standard conference format, the small scale of the event (comprising 30 participants), the partly shared and partly differing backgrounds and interests of those present, and the theme's topicality for the field and for the participants – in the context of our technologically mediated, structured and urgent world this seems to be a recipe for academic gatherings that genuinely foster exchange of ideas, inspire new thoughts and forge connections.

Once again, humanity finds itself facing fundamental questions of meaningful survival. Besides fine-tuning of specific case studies and models, it is necessary to come together and work on these fundamentals. As both higher education and research institutions encounter mounting existential crises of precarity and ideological pressure, preserving such intimate spaces of academic solidarity is a vital act of collective scholarly resilience.

⁴ For an Estonian-language overview of the previous two meetings, see Kull *et al.* 2024.

References

- Andrews, Edna 2003. *Conversations with Lotman: The Implications of Cultural Semiotics in Language, Literature, and Cognition*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
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